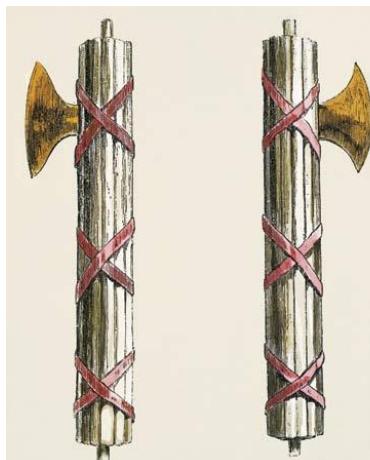


The Problem of defining Fascism

In 1938 the German novelist Thomas Mann judged that fascism was 'a disease of the times, which is at home everywhere and from which no country is free'. (The convention is adopted here of using 'Fascism', with a capital 'F', for the Italian example and 'fascism', with a small 'f', for the more general phenomenon.) Many political commentators agreed with him. Fascism was, quite simply, 'the plague of the twentieth century'. Today, fascism is little more than a term of abuse, but in the interwar years there seemed to be fascist movements in virtually every European country. In Italy Il Duce, Benito Mussolini, had come to power in 1922, a year which he soon decided should begin an entirely new calendar: it would be Year One in the Fascist Era. In Germany the Führer, Adolf Hitler, had come to power in 1933, proclaiming the inauguration of a Thousand Year Reich. Over the next few years other states - including Spain and Austria - seemed to fall prey to fascism, and Hitler's aggressive foreign policy looked likely to herald fascist domination of the whole of Europe, and perhaps of the world. A new dark age seemed about to dawn.



It is sometimes said that the word Fascism derives from the Latin word Fasces, which denotes bundles of rods, often attached to an axe (see left), carried in front of the lictors (magistrates of high status) in ancient Rome as symbols of authority, unity and justice. Any meaning deriving from this must be vague, but in fact this was merely an adopted association. Once he was in power Mussolini wanted his regime to be seen as the heir to the Roman Empire, and so he adopted this dignified symbol. In reality, Fascism derived from the Italian word Fascio (plural fasci), meaning a group, club or band. It was a term associated with rebels.

'Our doctrine is action,' said Mussolini. Fascism is often synonymous with power politics rather than with any theories. Action comes first, and then the flexible theory of Fascism could be used to justify it - whatever it was. According to this viewpoint, Fascism is no more than a rationalisation of whatever the leader decided, thus making it a 'chaos of contradictions'.

Other experts, however, believe that it was an ideology. They have traced its origins back to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and to an intellectual revolt not only against rationalism but against the liberalism, industrialisation and urbanisation of the nineteenth century. Its formative ideas included the notion that life was a perpetual struggle, between nations as well as individuals, that race was a key concept (social Darwinism) and that each nation had a special identity. According to this interpretation, the forerunners of the fascists existed in the years before 1914, though fascism emerged fully only after the First World War.

The mass conflict of 1914-18 boosted fascist ideas and produced a group of ex-servicemen who found it very difficult to reintegrate into normal civilian life. Right-wing ideas are often popular with people who have a pessimistic view of human nature (e.g. Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*) and WWI gave people a lot to be pessimistic about. Furthermore, the war destabilised the existing regimes and, more particularly, produced in Russia a revolution by communists dedicated, at least in theory, to encouraging revolution in the West. The fascists gained widespread support by pledging themselves to resist the forces of world communism.

What were the common ideas associated with fascism? No definitive explanation can be given, but we can at least state some of the major ideas and alternative explanations.

- Almost all writers are agreed that fascists were against liberal democracy (and Communism) and believed in some form of dictatorship.
- Fascism was anti-intellectual and pro-action.
- Typically, the fascists also stressed not reason but emotion, and one of their strongest emotions was the insistence on the special identity of nations.
- Fascism stresses the importance of the leader of the nation, the heroic man of destiny.
- The fascist programme stresses 'national regeneration' which might mean addressing territorial, moral or economic grievances.
- Furthermore, they often emphasised struggle and violence.

Questions

1. Is fascism an ideology? Outline the main arguments for and against.
2. Why did the First World War encourage the development of fascism?
3. Draw a spider diagram to summarise the main features of fascism.